An Overview

What are the current and future workforce needs among Iowa’s social work labor force? And how can the National Association of Social Workers Iowa Chapter (NASW-IA) provide leadership to create solutions to address recruitment, retention and potential workforce shortages based on these needs?

These were the driving questions prompting an assessment of the Iowa social work labor force conducted by the University of Iowa and NASW-IA, with support from Telligen Community Initiatives and the National Association of Social Workers Foundation.

We used multiple methods to gather data from varied stakeholders. Understanding the needs of Iowa’s professional social work labor force involves looking at a broad picture, including social services employment in the state and the ability of schools of social work to produce the future workforce.

For the assessment we started from the understanding that the term social worker has multiple meanings. It is used as an occupational category to refer to people who work in a variety of social service positions, regardless of their educational background or credentials. In the assessment we differentiated between social workers with a bachelor’s or master’s degree in social work from a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited program and/or licensed by the Iowa Board of Social Work, and other uses of the term social worker more widely used in the labor market.

Please note: This is a brief summary of the workforce assessment. For more detailed information we encourage readers to read the full assessment report:


Key Questions

• To what extent is there a shortage of social workers in Iowa; where are these shortages most apparent; and what strategies can be used to address labor shortages?
• Do rural communities face unique struggles recruiting and retaining social workers; and what strategies do they use to address problems?

• What are the key diversity challenges facing Iowa’s social work labor force; and what strategies are used to address these challenges?

• What actions can NASW-IA initiate, and with which community partners, in order to address current and emergent workforce needs?

Methods
This assessment used a mixed-methods approach, collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data through sequenced components occurring in two phases.

Phase I: Focus groups and key informant interviews
Because the study had a particular focus on workforce issues around diversity and rurality, we identified focus group locations in each of the five regions of the NASW-IA that provided a good representation of racial and ethnic diversity, child welfare involvement, aging population, and/or low local availability of licensed social workers.

To address rurality, four of the five sites were located in more rural areas relative to other towns/cities in the region. The focus group sites were: Storm Lake (Buena Vista County), Perry (Dallas County), Fort Madison (Lee County), Clarinda (Page County), and Waterloo (Black Hawk County-urban location).

We then conducted interviews with professionals in fields of practice that were under-represented in focus group attendance. We used information from the focus groups and interviews to shape the content of surveys distributed in Phase II.

Phase II: Surveys
We conducted three different web-based surveys in Phase II:

1) Survey of Iowa’s 13 schools of social work asking about student enrollment and demographic characteristics.

2) Survey of individuals with social work degrees administered in three ways: electronic distribution to alumni by schools of social work; survey link posted on the Iowa Social Workers Facebook page; and electronic distribution to the NASW-IA’s email list.

3) Survey of employers: a brief survey administered to employers, focusing on recruitment and retention. With no ready comprehensive source of email addresses for human services employers, we created an email list across varied fields of practice, using available information from the web and county human resource directories.

Key Findings
We organized key findings and recommendations in three categories: social work education; social work labor markets; and professional concerns.

1. Social work education

_We do not have comprehensive statewide data on the individuals graduating from Iowa’s schools of social work – the future professional workforce._

Schools of social work are the producers of the future professional social work workforce. However, we do not have comprehensive data on who the students are and the degree to which they can fulfill Iowa’s future labor market demands. Although CSWE compiles some data across programs, the elements change from year to year and the reports do not provide state-level demographic and geographic breakdowns. With 13 colleges and universities statewide with accredited social work education programs, compiling this information longitudinally is a feasible task. It will require engaging all social work programs to become invested in a collective process.
Recommendations: Develop a workforce initiative involving all Iowa social work education programs:

1. Compile data annually on numbers of BA/BSW and MSW graduates.

2. Annually compile and review demographic characteristics including rural representation, bilingualism, fields of practice, and career trajectories.

3. Bring community college human services programs into this effort, as they are both a feeder (to social work BA/BSW programs) and producer of the non-degreed social work labor force.

Based on information we do have, schools of social work have a role to play in strengthening recruitment to meet critical workforce needs.

Social work education programs are recruiting and training the future workforce. Given the need for more social workers to serve rural areas and non-English speaking populations, social work education programs can play an important role in filling these labor market needs.

Recommendation: As part of the workforce initiative described above, we recommend that NASW-IA work with schools of social work and community college representatives to develop strategies for recruiting bilingual individuals into the social work profession. It seems more promising to recruit individuals who are fluent in a second language and steeped in the culture, including members of Iowa’s immigrant communities and students majoring in foreign languages, to become social workers than to hope that social work students will become fluent in a second language. To increase the numbers of social workers in rural areas, we recommend expanding Iowa’s online MSW options to further reach rural residents.

Work experience with specific populations or specific fields of practice is valued by employers, sometimes more than an educational credential.

Developing strategies (beyond the field placement) for social work students to gain work experience prior to degree completion may benefit them in the labor market.

We learned from focus groups and interviews that employers are looking for people with work experience with the population served by their organization. Many new graduates are entering the labor force with little more than a field placement or practicum (which some employers do not count as work experience). We also learned from focus groups, interviews, and the survey of employers, that not everyone sees a social work degree with the same value.

Recommendation: Schools of social work, by working with their college/university career centers and local human service organizations, can facilitate students’ gaining employment experience. Most students hold at least part-time jobs while they are completing their education. Focusing on employment with social service agencies will benefit them when they enter the labor market upon graduation. Additionally, in order to promote the value of a social work degree, we suggest that a marketing strategy is needed to develop a solid argument for the value of a social work degree, and a credible

In 2016-2017, across Iowa’s 13 accredited schools of social work based on 91.5% response rate:

168 MSW and 211 BA/BSW degrees were awarded.


4.2% of social worker survey respondents report they are fluent in more than one language.
“pitch” about why employers should hire people with a social work degree. This appears to be obvious to people who have a social work degree, less so to others.

2. Social work labor markets

We do not have a feasible, efficient system to track the labor market demands of “social workers” in the broader sense of the term. There is no comprehensive email listing of Iowa employers who hire (and potentially hire) social workers.

Our ability to probe attitudes toward hiring credentialed social workers across the larger population of social service agencies was limited by the absence of a comprehensive listing of these employers. In order to better understand labor market trends for the broadly defined social work workforce, we need an efficient way to communicate with potential employers. Through this assessment we began to develop an email list of employers, but additional work needs to be done for the list to be comprehensive and updated regularly.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that NASW-IA develop a comprehensive listing of employers of social workers that can be used for two purposes: 1) to gather information on labor market needs by fields of practice, populations, and geography; and, 2) for outreach to identify organizations with an interest in recruitment activities or other NASW-IA programs.

Recruitment appears to be a greater challenge than retention in Iowa’s social service agencies. There appear to be needs for social workers in rural areas (especially at the LISW level) and social workers who are bilingual, and for social workers whose racial/ethnic/gender characteristics fit the populations they are serving.

Based on information learned through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, recruitment seems to be more challenging than retention for most organizations. Recruitment is especially challenging for rural communities and for bilingual social workers. There are also fields of practice in which greater diversity of social workers are needed to better serve populations.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that NASW-IA engage interested employers in developing local recruitment plans to meet specific needs in fields of practice. For example, there seems to be a need for more male social workers to work with the chronically mentally ill and disabled populations, and a need for more African-American social workers to work in child welfare services. Needs for more bilingual and rural social workers are issues to address both in the labor market and in schools of social work (discussed previously). Additionally, NASW-IA should consider working with rural employers to develop pilot projects to increase access to social work services, especially those of LISWs, in rural areas using varied technologies. Some employers are already reconfiguring jobs to facilitate access to LISWs while trying to reduce travel time. The expanding use of technology also holds promise for improving access to social work services in rural areas.

**Greatest recruitment challenges, according to employers:**

- finding employees to work in rural communities
- recruiting bilingual social workers
- recruiting employees with backgrounds similar to clients in race and ethnicity
3. Professional Concerns

Professional identity and commitment among social workers currently working in social work positions is strong. Yet financial issues, including low salaries and student debt burden, are serious problems for many social workers. Few have received loan forgiveness and a substantial number hold more than one job.

Survey results revealed strong professional identity and pride in being a social worker. While financial stress varied across individuals, there is a sizable number of social workers who find it difficult to make ends meet on their salaries, and a sizable number of social workers saddled with student loan debt that is compounding their financial stress. Staff leaving for higher paying positions was problematic in some agencies. Issues related to salary and student loan burden came through in survey responses and in open-ended survey comments.

"Most students have substantial debt to pay off while not being adequately paid to do so."

"I am annoyed that we do not do a better job of advocating for our pay."

"I loved working in social work, but it did not pay the bills."

Recommendation:

NASW-IA should continue its advocacy role for social work, seeking to expand access to loan forgiveness programs for social workers and advocating for pay commensurate with value. As part of this, a public relations campaign to promote the skills/value of social workers might improve the perception—by the general public and legislature—of what contemporary social work looks like. Enlisting the help of a marketing expert (as was recommended for schools of social work) would be helpful in designing an effective campaign. But because this is an issue with national implications and applicable to all NASW chapters, we recommend that National NASW engage in a broader campaign to improve the status of social work and support local chapters in tailoring their campaigns to meet local circumstances.

There is considerable concern over the impact of managed care on Iowa’s community agencies, on social workers who need to satisfy the demands of managed care organizations (MCOs), and questions about the resulting quality of care.

Issues related to the impact of managed care emerged in focus groups, interviews, and surveys, and these were among the most negative findings. The concerns included: 1) MCOs were hiring social workers away from community-based organizations; 2) MCOs were restricting services in ways that were perceived as detrimental to client well-being; 3) the demands of MCOs contributed to a negative work environment; and 4) the demands for increased documentation were a factor in employee retention.

Recommendation: In light of the negativity surrounding the impact of managed care, we

Most frequently noted reasons for turnover:

- Increased demands for documentation
- Increased expectations for productivity
- Leaving for higher paying jobs
- Lack of opportunities for advancement
recommend that NASW-IA partner with a health care research funding source to consider and determine the feasibility of conducting an in-depth study of the impact of managed care on service quality and access. Such a study might better determine what aspects of managed care processes are problematic and what processes are working well and propose recommendations for improvement. We acknowledge that this task might be difficult to complete, as the issues are politically thorny and conducting a study will require collaboration by numerous entities.

“Managed care has affected the job so much, it has made me pessimistic and at times very worried about the future…”

“I left practicing in the community due to the MCO arrangement in Iowa.”

There are varied experiences with, and opinions about, supervision and licensing. Access to supervision is more problematic for some social workers than for others, which may be prompting concerns about the restrictiveness of who may provide supervision.

29% of Iowa’s 99 counties have 3 or fewer Licensed Independent Social Workers.

Numerous concerns emerged about the supervision and licensure process—not universally, but certainly for some. Access to supervision in order to attain licensure is more of a problem in rural areas and in certain fields of practice. There were also concerns from social workers living near state borders regarding the requirements and burdens for dual licenses in order to serve clients in two states, though this is outside of NASW-IA’s scope.

Recommendation: Based on the concerns expressed, we recommend that NASW-IA strive to recruit more rural and linguistically diverse licensed social workers to become supervisors. This could be initiated by convening a work group comprised of licensing experts and geographically and linguistically diverse LISWs. The purpose of such a group would be to review barriers to supervision access for rural and bilingual populations and to propose a plan for strengthening recruitment.

Limitations

There are some important limitations to this assessment. Focus groups and interviews were based on non-probability sample selection and due to limited time and resources, involved small numbers of respondents. Survey response rates were well below acceptable rates for generalizability. Therefore, the findings of this assessment must be viewed cautiously. Even though triangulating data from multiple components yielded consistent findings, we still regard findings as exploratory.

Read the full assessment report at: www.iowanasw.org.

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